



Plastic or Cloth?

Posted by [Pierluigi Oliverio](#) on Monday, September 28, 2009

It is well known that the city of San Jose is on its way to banning single-use plastic bags starting in Jan 2011. An ordinance will come back to Council in 2010 for final adoption which will contain different options. The most problematic option I could see is a fee put on single-use bags.

The 25-cent fee would be charged for each bag and would not go towards libraries or police but rather to hire new people to administer the program and regulate retail stores. The store owner would have to collect the fee, record it, give it to the city and then possibly have to undergo audits. This is a painful process that a business does not want to take on. For the resident who pays the fee there is little value in paying for salaries of people to manage this program. It seems to me that most residents would rather have fees or taxes go towards neighborhood services that would enhance their daily lives.

If plastic bags are so bad, then let's ban plastic bags altogether rather than create a plastic bag fee bureaucracy. However, I believe the plastic bag debate is the beginning of discussions regarding the environment. Americans use more resources per person than all other countries. American consumers' choices have an impact on the environment. Banning products that are not environmentally friendly will also have an effect on those who are employed in those industries. But are plastic bags the number one problem for San Jose? No. The City of San Jose needs to avoid bankruptcy and switch to a two-tier pension system for new city employees.

However, staying on topic, the plastic bag issue does speak to the impacts of consumption. Certainly plastic water bottles are a menace to society with the plastic bottle island in the Pacific Ocean. (Sidenote: Did you know there is less than one person in the US government regulating bottled water for health and safety?) How about banning Styrofoam? Or all that packaging to protect our consumer electronics that could certainly be done in a more environmentally friendly way. Or maybe banning beef, as it takes 500 quarts of water to produce one pound of beef while the same amount in grain takes 2-20 quarts. Or

banning incandescent light bulbs since new CFL bulbs use 75 percent less energy, produce 75 percent less heat and last 10 times as long.

If we really want to divert waste from our landfills to implement the San Jose Green Vision then perhaps we look at disposable diapers. Disposable diapers take up the most non organic space in land fills. Back before the days of convenience and mass consumption people used cloth diapers that were washable. Having changed a diaper in my life, I can definitely see the value of getting rid of that smelly diaper but it has its impact.

Eighty percent of the diaper changes in this nation are done with disposables. That comes to 18 billion diapers a year which is a \$3 billion industry in the USA. Each diaper has an outer layer of waterproof polypropylene and an inner layer of fluff made from wood pulp plus super-slurper sodium polyacrylate that can hold a hundred times its weight in water.

Those 18 billion diapers add up to 82,000 tons of plastic a year and 1.3 million tons of wood pulp—250,000 trees. After a bowel movement these diapers are trucked away to landfills, where they sit as neatly wrapped packages of excrement, it is estimated to take 250-500 years to decompose, long after your children, grandchildren and great, great, grandchildren will be gone.

The instructions on a disposable diaper package advise that all fecal matter should be deposited in the toilet before discarding, yet less than one half of one percent of all waste from single-use diapers goes into the sewage system. Cloth diapers are reused 50 to 200 times before being turned into rags. Disposable diapers generate sixty times more solid waste and use twenty times more raw materials, like crude oil and wood pulp than cloth diapers. In 1991, an attempt towards recycling disposable diapers was made in the city of Seattle, involving 800 families, 30 day care centers, a hospital and a Seattle-based recycle for a period of one year. The conclusion was that recycling disposable diapers was not economically feasible on any scale.

I believe consumers and different levels of government will be dealing with these choices in perpetuity and there will be many debates and long council meetings across the country.

Thank you to the more than 100 people that turned out to City Hall last Monday to watch the film about water scarcity called FLOW. The next event is discussion with the San Jose Redevelopment Agency at the Willow Glen Library on Saturday Oct 3 at 10:30am.

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